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THE UNEXPECTED JOY OF GROCERY SHOPPING ON HOLIDAY

The unexpected joy of grocery shopping on holiday

Olga Alexandru (/author/olga-alexandru) 7 July 2022



When you go abroad, your instinct is probably to beeline for the museums. Olga Alexandru argues that supermarkets are a vital part of the holiday experience

For most people, the weekly shop is a mundane task that gets sandwiched between the school run and making dinner (<https://www.readersdigest.co.uk/food-drink/recipes/world-kitchen-bibimbap>). I find a lot of joy in grocery shopping. Working from home allows me to go when the supermarkets are quiet, and I can wander up and down every aisle dreaming of endless food possibilities. But even I sometimes get bored with the options at my local grocery store. Enter the holiday (<https://www.readersdigest.co.uk/lifestyle/travel/swap-the-weekend-getaway-for-a-month-long-trip>) grocery shop.

Catering to your own dietary requirements



As a vegan (<https://www.readersdigest.co.uk/inspire/life/6-reason-to-become-vegan>), finding restaurants that cater to my needs is not always easy abroad, so I always make sure to book a place that has a kitchen. If nothing else, it helps to be able to have breakfast first thing in the morning without walking around for hours trying to find somewhere suitable or unsuccessfully Googling “vegan breakfast near me”. One of the first things I do, after dropping my bags off, is go to the grocery store. I don’t cook every meal in my rental accommodation; that would be boring and beside the point of travelling to a new place. But I do love to look for local delicacies and accidentally vegan treats.

I’ve gotten good at reading foreign language (<https://www.readersdigest.co.uk/inspire/life/how-to-learn-a-new-language-as-an-adult>) food labels at warp speed. I know the words for milk and eggs in several languages, which helps the process go quicker. Grocery stores feel like a great way to immerse myself in a new culture. By seeing what their supermarket aisles are filled with, you start to see what the people value. In Torino, I learned that Italy (<https://www.readersdigest.co.uk/lifestyle/travel/italys-lake-como-a-love-story>) has laws about buying alcohol after 9pm. There was a comedy of errors situation where my partner was trying to buy non-alcoholic beer, but they wouldn’t let him because it was after the curfew. We tried to show the security guard that the beer was non-alcoholic but the language barrier proved too much. Luckily somebody who knew English came over and explained it to him, and we were able to complete our purchase.

“By seeing what their supermarket aisles are filled with, you start to see what the people value”

The variety of vegan products in different countries (<https://www.readersdigest.co.uk/food-drink/food-heroes/vegan-food-around-the-world>) fascinates me every time I travel somewhere new. In Malta, I found the most delicious chocolate-filled croissants that just so happened to be vegan, a product I would struggle to find even in the UK. I ended up eating these every day for breakfast, delighted that I could enjoy such an unexpected treat.

Another vegan surprise in Malta was their selection of ice cream available even in the smallest of grocery stores, the best of which was a pack of delicious ice cream sandwiches.

What you can't find is interesting, too

What I'm able to find in grocery stores abroad is almost as interesting as what is harder to find. Finding hummus (<https://www.readersdigest.co.uk/food-drink/recipes/10-delicious-dips-for-a-light-lunch-or-snack>) or tortilla wraps turns into quite a mission whenever I visit my hometown, Cluj, in Romania (<https://www.readersdigest.co.uk/lifestyle/travel/travelling-in-dracula-country>). There is usually only one variety of hummus, sold in a very small tub and only in the deli section. It tastes different to the hummus I'm used to, not in a bad way, but it takes some getting used to.

Tortilla wraps always require a trip to the bigger grocery store, because they are never available at the smaller ones. While wraps might be hard to acquire, smoked tofu, an ingredient that is expensive and hard to source all year long in the UK, is readily available in all grocery stores no matter what time of the year I go. They also have a vegan feta that is so creamy and true to the original that I have asked my mom to ship some over on more than one occasion.

Living like a local



By wandering around a grocery store in another country, I can imagine what the lives of its citizens are like. In Italy seeing one aisle filled entirely with different types of pasta, I smiled to myself and thought that it's not just a stereotype: Italians really do love their [pasta](https://www.readersdigest.co.uk/food-drink/recipes/10-wonderful-ways-with-pasta). Going to Lidl and Aldi in Germany, walking through the famed middle aisle was a delight, seeing the types of things that Germans might impulse buy.

People might find it a weird habit to go grocery shopping on holiday. Surely, I'd rather spend my time doing something more fun like visiting museums or a local eatery. And don't get me wrong, I love doing those things too. But there's something about being immersed in the day to day lives of a country's citizens that feels important to understanding more about them. For all they know, [I am not a tourist but a local](https://www.readersdigest.co.uk/lifestyle/travel/how-to-acquire-local-knowledge-on-your-holiday). This, of course, tends to break down when I go to pay for my items. But for that half an hour I can pretend I am a local doing my weekly grocery shop and put myself in their shoes.

"For all they know, I am not a tourist but a local"

I can watch hyper kids begging their parents for sweets, an international experience that needs no language. Or watch couples pick up snacks and drinks for a party on a Friday night. Grocery shopping is an act of people watching (<https://www.readersdigest.co.uk/lifestyle/travel/the-art-of-parisian-people-watching>) as much as it is about buying food. It's a chance to slow down and imagine what people's lives are like, and find that they are not so different from our own.

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